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ABSTRACT

This investigation at a southern Texas school district examined three factors that bear on teachers' decisions to recommend first- and second-grade students for retention: (1) criteria used by teachers, (2) degree to which criteria are common among teachers, and (3) relationship of recommendations for promotion or retention to objective measures of student achievement. Teachers were interviewed concerning their retention recommendations, and standardized reading achievement test scores of students recommended for retention were compared with those of "borderline" students considered for retention, but promoted. Results indicate three major factors in teachers' decisions to retain or promote students: (1) noncompletion of primer, (2) immaturity, and (3) anticipated parental resistance. No significant differences were found between reading achievement test scores for those recommended and for those only considered for retention. The suggestion is made that standard criteria based on objective measures of student progress would introduce more rationality and equity in the decision-making process. A seven-item list of references is appended. (TE)

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TEACHER DECISION-MAKING IN STUDENT RETENTION

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by:

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EA 017 417

TEACHER DECISION-MAKING IN STUDENT RETENTION

Ever since the graded system of education was imported to the United States in the 19th century, educators have been confronted annually with decisions regarding which students should be required to repeat their grades during the ensuing year. Among the students in any given grade, which ones would have their educational interests best served by remaining another year in the current grade? And behind the decision of "Who should be retained?" looms the epistemological question, "According to what criteria?" In spite of the significance of this latter question, there has never been a response that has enjoyed widespread acceptance. Researchers have long noted the variability in student retention rates among and within school districts and have suggested that the variability is due, not only to differences in student progress, but also to differences in philosophic outlook and pedagogical beliefs. Whether a student is promoted or retained may depend as much on which district or school the student attends as on his rate of progress (Ayres, Caswell, Peyton).

The concern for promotion/retention criteria is currently heightened by accountability pressures and the attendant calls for more stringent promotion standards. This, in the face of a decade-long national increase in retention rates (Bureau of Census) and the questionable efficacy of retention as a means of increasing student learning (Jackson, Thompson).

The foregoing suggests that the criteria and procedures for making decisions regarding student retention deserve more scrutiny than they have normally received. Surveys of school district policies governing student

retention/promotion reveal a melange of standards (OHO), but there is no reported research on what is perhaps the most important element in retention decision-making -- the teacher's criteria for determining that a student should be retained. As the professional in direct contact with the student with the student and his progress, the teacher seems likely to be the pivotal figure in student retention/promotion decisions; therefore, the teacher's criteria for making decisions to recommend a student for retention would seem to be a matter of some importance.

The purpose of this investigation was to examine the factors which bear on teachers' decisions to recommend students for retention. Specifically, three questions were addressed: (1) What criteria are used by teachers in arriving at their decisions to recommend students for retention? (2) To what degree are the criteria common among teachers? (3) How are teachers' recommendations to retain or promote students related to objective measures of those students' achievement?

The first two research questions were addressed by means of teacher interviews and the third by a comparison of achievement scores of students whom teachers recommended for retention with scores of students whom the same teachers had considered but had not recommended.

Setting for the Study

The study was conducted in a school enrolling only first and second grade students in a school district in South Texas. The policy of the district calls for all recommendations for retention in grade to be initiated by the teacher. Such recommendations are referred to a committee consisting of the parent, the principal, and all teachers who have had regular contact with the student

(i.e., homeroom, Chapter I, Resource Room). Such committees seek a consensus decision on retention, but if none is forthcoming, the principal makes the final decision. The initial referral decision is, of course, a critical one. A child who is not referred will not be retained.

The concentration of all first grade students in the district in the same school provided ten first grade teachers and their students as subjects and controlled for district and school variables.

Procedures

The investigation was conducted in two phases: (1) an interview phase in which teachers were queried concerning their retention recommendation decisions, and (2) a test score comparison phase in which standardized test scores of students who were recommended for retention were compared with scores of students whom teachers considered but did not recommend.

Interview Procedures and Content

Interviews were conducted in May, 1982, after decisions had been made regarding which students were to be retained in grade for the following year. Each of the ten teachers was interviewed privately in her classroom with a standard interview guide. The content of the interview varied with whether or not the teacher had recommended any students for retention. Six had and four had not. The following are the interview questions:

1. (For teachers who recommended children for retention.) You recommended _____ children to be retained in the first grade next year. From your year's acquaintance with these children you came to have reasons why you

felt that it would be better for them to be retained than promoted. Please consider each of these children and indicate reasons why you recommended the child for retention.

Let's begin with (child's name). Why did you recommend him/her for retention? (Record responses verbatim and probe.)

2. (For teachers who had recommended children for retention.) Were there children whom you considered for retention but chose not to recommend that they be retained? (If "yes" response, proceed.) Please name each of these children and the reason or reasons you chose not to recommend them. (Record responses verbatim and probe.)

3. (For teachers who did not recommend students for retention.) Although you did not recommend children for retention this year, there may have been some whom you considered recommending. Is this the case? (If "yes" response, continue.) Please name each of these children and the reasons you chose not to recommend him or her, even though you had considered it. (Record responses verbatim and probe.)

After responding to the above questions, teachers invariably added general statements regarding their criteria for deciding to recommend a child for retention. These criteria took the form of "rules of thumb," which will be discussed subsequently.

Analysis was straightforward. Post-hoc categories were developed under three headings: Reasons for Recommending Students for Retention; Reasons for Not Recommending Students Who Were Considered but Not Recommended; Rules of Thumb for Retaining Students.

Results

In Table I are frequency of mention of various reasons for retention. In this table the unit of analysis is the teacher. Regardless of how often a teacher mentioned a reason (e.g., mentioning the same reason for recommending three different children), the reason was recorded only once for that teacher.

TABLE I

Reasons Given by Teachers for Recommending Students for Retention in Grade

Reason	Frequency Mentioned
Immaturity	8
Is Not Beyond Readiness Level	1
Doesn't Know (Specific Reading Skill)	3
Has Not Completed Primer	1

As the data in Table I indicate, the most common reason given for recommending a child for retention was "immaturity." This seemed to be a general term applied to children who did not follow directions in a group setting. Typical comments indicating student "immaturity" were, "He won't stay on task unless I'm right with him," and "She can't be depended on to complete her workbook assignments while I'm working with another reading group." It was obvious that this highly important criterion was based on observations of student conduct, not on assessments of academic achievement.

In Table II are the reasons teachers gave for not recommending a child for retention after they had first considered the possibility. Several teachers gave multiple reasons, and there was not a strong clustering around a single, common reason. Three teachers weighed the recent reading progress rates of potential retainees quite heavily and were inhibited in recommending for retention any child who had recently demonstrated a growth spurt. Three teachers

TABLE II

Reasons for Not Recommending Children Who Were First Considered

Reasons	Frequency Mentioned
Recent Spurt	3
Too Old/Large	3
Anticipated Lack of Parent Cooperation	3
Potential Discipline Problem if Retained	2
Doesn't Have Ability to Profit from Repetition	1
Would Discourage Student	1
Child Might Not Be in This School Next Year	1

anticipated the degree of parental resistance to the retention of their children and did not recommend retention if strong resistance seemed likely. Some teachers did not recommend students for retention because of their large physical size. Two teachers rejected the idea of retaining certain students because the students were perceived as "discipline problems" and were thus likely to

interfere with the learning of next year's first grade students if they were retained.

Although teachers' expressed reasons for recommending or not recommending students for retention centered on their deportment, probing of teachers' responses revealed that there were implicit reading progress criteria that were prior to student behavior considerations. For example, a student who was a star reader was not going to become a candidate for retention regardless of his immaturity. Each teacher had a rule of thumb, often based on the basal reading series progression. Any child who fell below a certain point in the series came under scrutiny as a possible candidate for retention. The point of progress was based on the teacher's assumption concerning whether a child below that point would be more like first graders or more similar to second graders during the ensuing year. These reading progress rules of thumb and other informal general criteria used by the teachers are presented in Table III.

TABLE III

Rules of Thumb for Retaining Students

Rule	Frequency Mentioned
1. Child below a critical point in the basal reading series	8
Critical points:	
a. Has not finished pre-primer	2
b. Has not finished primer	4
c. Has not finished (different points in first reader)	2
2. Never keep a large child back	5
3. Immaturity is the key	2
4. Don't retain children who are naturally slow	2
5. Never retain without parental cooperation	3
6. Retain if child does not know (specific skill)	3
7. Never retain a child	2

The rules of thumb echo many of the reasons teachers had given for retaining or not retaining specific children. Conspicuous by their absence were any mentions of the results of standardized achievement tests, although these were available to teachers.

Phase Two

The second phase of the study was a comparison of objective measures of reading achievement of students who were recommended for retention with objective measures of children who were considered for retention but not recommended. The purpose of this phase was to ascertain whether the teachers' decisions were consonant with objective measures of student achievement.

The method of comparison was to compute a Mann-Whitney U-test between two sets of scores, one for the recommended and one for the considered group. One set of scores consists of the results of the reading test from the Metropolitan Achievement Battery administered in April, and the other set consists of the results of a district criterion-referenced test in reading. The results of the analyses are presented in Tables IV and V.

TABLE IV

Mann-Whitney U-Test Analysis of Standardized Reading Achievement Test of Recommended and Considered Students

(R - Recommended for Retention) (C - Considered but Not Recommended)

Rank	Category	Rank	Category
1	R	9	R
2	R	10	C
3	R	11	C
4	C	12	R
5	C	13	R
6	C	14	C
7	R	15	C
8	R	16	R

U = 26

p => .05

TABLE V

Mann-Whitney U-Test Analysis of Criterion-Referenced Scores of Recommended and Considered Students

(R - Recommended)		(C - Considered)	
Rank	Category	Rank	Category
1	C	11	R
2	R	12	R
3	R	13	R
4	C	14	C
5	C	15	C
6	C	16	R
7	R	17	R
8	R	18	R
9	C	19	R
10	C		

U = 42

p = .05

The analyses show that there was no significant difference between the scores of the two groups on either test.

Discussion

Although the data in Tables I, II, and III reflect, in a general way, the major considerations of teachers in making retention and promotion decisions, it would be misleading to suggest that the tables in this report accurately mirror the thinking of these teachers regarding the retention of students. Categorical frequencies can hardly portray the complexity and subtlety of their belief

structures. Aware of the difficult questions surrounding the promotion and retention of students, they were reluctant to offer a single and absolute criterion for retention (with the exception of the two who said they never retained children). Rather, most of them provided a hierarchy of criteria of varying degrees of precision and mentioned qualifiers which influenced their use of those criteria. An approximation of these belief structures could be presented as flow charts which portray a complex of beliefs, assumptions, and thought processes that underlay each teacher's decisions to recommend students for promotion or retention. Flow charts are presented as representative of the thought processes of two teachers in Figures 1 and 2. It should be made clear that these are presented only as approximations. They reflect reconstructed logic as perceived by the investigator and not the deliberate constructions of the teachers themselves.

Figure 1: Ms. A's Decision-Making Structure for Recommending Promotion or Retention

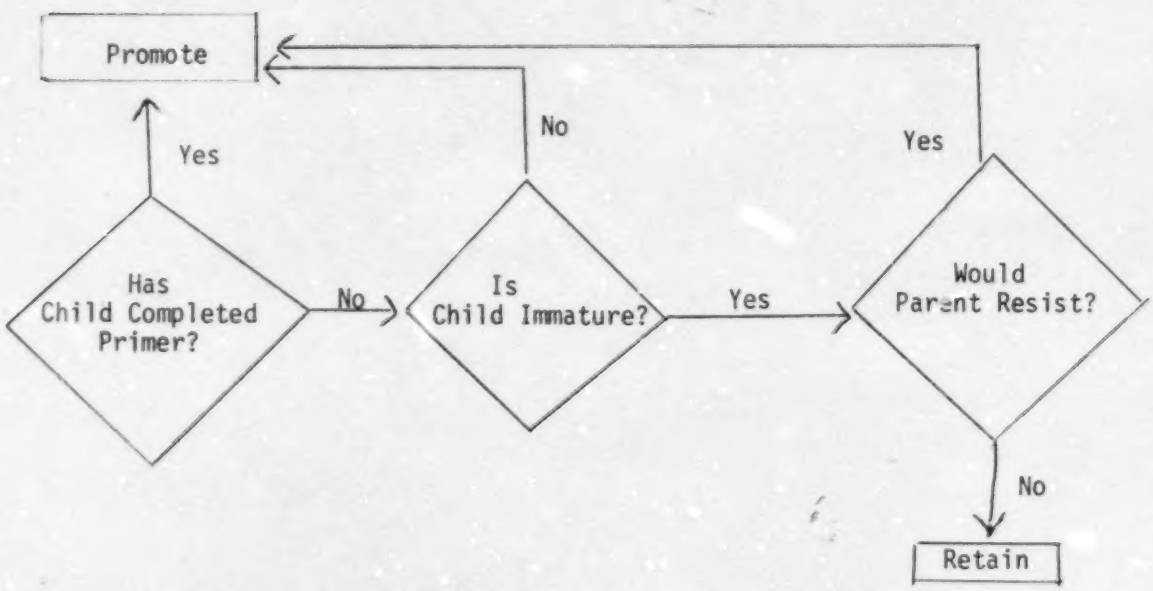
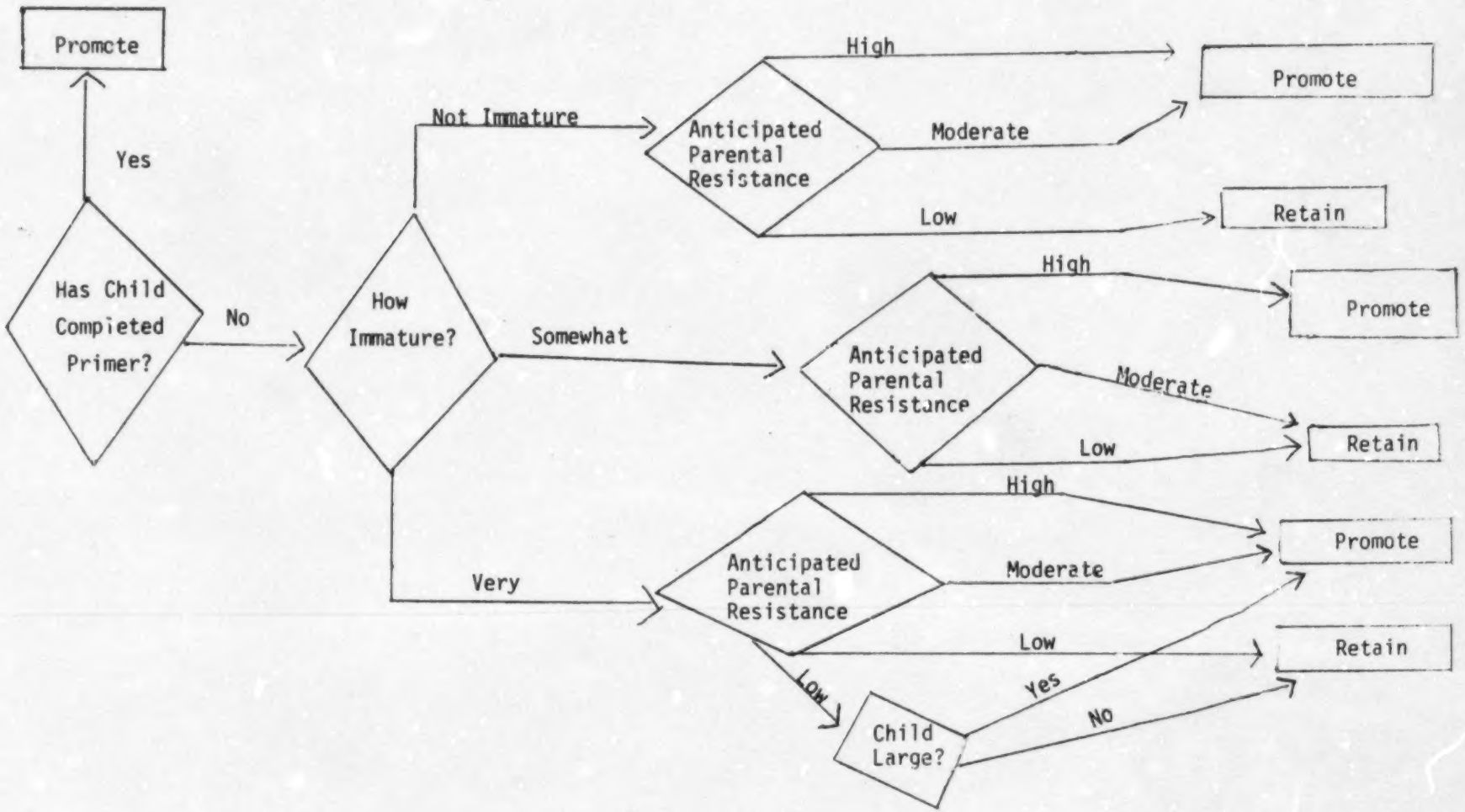


Figure 2: Ms. B's Decision-Making Structure for Recommending Promotion or Retention



As may be seen, Ms. A's structure (Figure 1) was less refined than Ms. B's. Ms. A, as did all of the teachers except for the two who said that they never recommended retention, began her deliberation with a consideration of the child's point of progress in the basal reading series. Completion of the primer assured promotion. Even a child who had not completed the primer would not be recommended for retention, however, unless Ms. A considered the child to be immature, and she anticipated no resistance from the parents.

Ms. B's structure (Figure 2) reveals that she also used student immaturity and anticipated parental resistance as criteria, but with provision for interaction between those two variables and the use of student physical size as a qualifier.

Similar depictions of all of the teachers' decision-making structures would reveal sometimes dramatic, sometimes subtle, differences in kinds and numbers of criteria employed, the order of their importance, and degrees of refinement in perception of criteria levels. Teacher decisions to recommend students for retention, then, were highly idiosyncratic. Whether or not a student was recommended for retention depended heavily on who was making the recommendation.

The failure to find significant differences between reading achievement scores of students whom teachers recommended for retention and scores of students whom they only considered suggests that either the teachers' judgments were inaccurate, or that reading achievement was a weaker factor in the decision-making process than were student characteristics and anticipated parental attitudes. While one might expect an overlap in the distribution of achievement scores of students recommended for retention and those of students who were only considered, it does seem that there would be a significant difference between the scores of the groups if teachers were giving primary consideration to students' reading achievement in making their recommendations.

Implications

Given the incompleteness of knowledge regarding the effects of retention and the absence of agreement among educators on relevant philosophical issues, high degrees of reliability across school districts in their retention decisions is too much to expect. The judgmental nature of decisions on student retention suggests that they will always be influenced by interactions among the variables mentioned by teachers in this investigation. It would seem, however, that within a given school district, and certainly within a given school, more rationality could be brought to the process than was the case with this particular school. The major impediment to rationality in this school was the complete absence of constraints on the teacher's recommendation decisions. In the absence of standardized, substantive criteria for recommending students for retention, the procedural guidelines were weak assurances of similar treatment of similar cases. Teacher use of standard criteria based on objective measures of student progress would introduce more rationality and equity into the decision-making process. It would seem that any district which relies on teacher recommendations in the retention decision process would do well to constrain the recommendation decision with substantive guidelines (i.e., no child whose reading score is at or above the 40th percentile on both "X" standardized achievement test and the district's criterion-referenced test should be referred for retention). The decision to retain a student has dramatic implications for the student's educational and personal development. Students in the same school are at least entitled to similar treatment of similar cases.

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